



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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For Immediate Release

Tuesday, September 20, 2011

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NIH study finds hospitalizations increase for alcohol and drug overdoses

Hospitalizations for alcohol and drug overdoses — alone or in combination — increased dramatically among 18- to 24-year-olds between 1999 and 2008, according to a study by researchers at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), part of the National Institutes of Health.

Led by Aaron M. White, Ph.D. and Ralph W. Hingson, Sc.D., of NIAAA's division of epidemiology and prevention research, the study examined hospitalization data from the Nationwide Inpatient Sample, a project of the U.S. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality designed to approximate a 20 percent sample of U.S. community hospitals. The findings appear in the September issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

Drs. White, Hingson, and their colleagues report that, over the 10-year study period, hospitalizations among 18-24-year-olds increased by 25 percent for alcohol overdoses; 56 percent for drug overdoses; and 76 percent for combined alcohol and drug overdoses.

"In 2008, 1 out of 3 hospitalizations for overdoses in young adults involved excessive consumption of alcohol," notes Dr. White. "Alcohol overdoses alone caused 29,000 hospitalizations, combined alcohol and other drug overdoses caused 29,000, and drug overdoses alone caused another 114,000. The cost of these hospitalizations now exceeds \$1.2 billion per year just for 18-24-year-olds."

According to the authors, this is a growing problem for those outside of the 18-24 age range, as well.

"Among the entire population 18 and older, 1.6 million people were hospitalized for overdoses in 2008, at a cost of \$15.5 billion, and half of these hospitalizations involved alcohol overdoses," adds Dr. Hingson.

The current study also showed an increase of 122 percent in the rate of poisonings from prescription opioid pain medications and related narcotics among 18-24 year olds. An alcohol overdose was present in 1 of 5 poisonings on these medications.

"The combination of alcohol with narcotic pain medications is particularly dangerous, because they both suppress activity in brain areas that regulate breathing and other vital functions," says Dr. White.

The researchers note that the steep rise in combined alcohol and drug overdoses highlights the significant risk and growing threat to public health of combining alcohol with other substances, including prescription medications. They call for stronger efforts to educate medical practitioners and the general public about the dangers of excessive alcohol consumption alone or in combination with other drugs.

"An increase in screening for alcohol misuse would help clinicians identify patients at particularly high risk for excessive drinking and for alcohol and medication interactions," says NIAAA Acting Director Kenneth Warren, Ph.D. "Clinicians should use brief intervention techniques to help young adults evaluate their relationship with alcohol and other drugs and make wise choices regarding future use."

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, part of the National Institutes of Health, is the primary U.S. agency for conducting and supporting research on the causes, consequences, prevention, and treatment of alcohol abuse, alcoholism, and alcohol problems. NIAAA also disseminates research findings to general, professional, and academic audiences. Additional alcohol research information and publications are available at www.niaaa.nih.gov.

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Reference: Hospitalizations for Alcohol and Drug Overdoses in Young Adults Ages 18-24 in the United States, 1999-2008: Results from the Nationwide Inpatient Sample Aaron M. White, Ralph W. Hingson, I-Jen Pan, Hsiao-Ye Yi Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs (September 2011)

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